

Dentists extract thanks from Beninese locals

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The whine of a drill grinding away at a tooth is what most people think of when “dental visit” is mentioned.

For the 650 Beninese citizens seen by U.S. dentists during a MEDFLAG mission this spring to Africa, the fear of an electric drill was not necessary – there was no electricity at the school houses where the dentists set up their clinics. And electricity wasn’t all that was missing.

“I learned to do without all the comforts of a dental clinic,” said SrA. Johanny Manning, a dental assistant with the 48th Dental Squadron, stationed at RAF Lakenheath. “I also learned what ‘Army ingenuity’ means and what field dentistry is all about.”

Three airmen from the 48th joined 70 other airmen, soldiers and sailors for a two-week deployment to the sub-Saharan country of Benin where they helped to improve more than 16,500 lives with dental care, medical treatment and immunizations.

“Some of these people haven’t seen a doctor in this decade, maybe not in this century,” said John Yates, American Ambassador to Benin, an African country on the Gulf of Guinea, flanked by Togo and Nigeria.

The 48th airmen teamed up with their Army counterparts from the 464th Medical Company (Dental Services) located at Lundstul, Germany, to create field clinics with folding dental chairs, hand tools and battery-powered lights strapped to their heads.

“Being a dentist on a MEDFLAG is about the same as being in a clinic, except for one small exception – you don’t have the state of the art equipment, such as suction and lights, to do your job,” said Dr. (Capt.) Anthony Vitali, a dentist with the 48th.

Because of the lack of power, the dental teams limited themselves to two types of treatment – extractions and treating infections with antibiotics. But even with this “limited practice” the dentists had to change their tactics for removing decayed teeth.

“In the rear, we have rotary tools to grind away bone and section teeth. Here we are limited to hand tools,” said Army Dr. (Maj.) Robert L. Holmes, a dentist with the 464th. “Because we have no power and no air to run our turbine-driven tools, we used hammers and chisels when necessary.” Lack of electricity was not the main reason for providing limited care. The number of patients to be treated was the determining factor. According to Holmes, a dentist can extract a tooth in five to 10 minutes, where restorations usually take 30 to 45 minutes.



(Photo by SSgt. Jeff Troth)

Dr. (Capt.) Anthony Vitali works on a Beninese soldier as SrA. Johanny Manning assists him.

“The idea was to do the most good for the most people,” he said. “So the most definitive, one-time-thing we could do for them was extractions. This treatment would relieve pain and also infections.” Despite the limited treatment available, villagers walked for miles and waited in 100 degree heat for their opportunity to be seen by a U.S. dentist.

“The people were very caring and appreciated any treatment that we could give them,” said Army Sgt. Cassandra Snow, a dental assistant with the 464th. For some of the villagers that care meant a class on how

to use a toothbrush and tooth paste – a big change from their normal daily dental hygiene, which is chewing on a stick.

Although the majority of Benin’s population can still be seen chewing on their stick each morning, the 18 dental troops know that their time in Africa had an effect for those they saw.

“One thing I will remember the most is the knowledge that I made a difference in someone’s life,” said Vitali. “Someone who would not have had the chance for dental care if we hadn’t of been there.”